

Pattern of slaughter confounds French

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The Independent, July 3, 1994

From ROBERT BLOCK in Bisesro, Rwanda Sunday 3 July 1994

THE FRENCH marine stared at the hundreds of wounded and famished Tutsis who had been hunted for months by machete-wielding Hutus. He shook his head. 'We have been deceived,' the soldier, Sergeant Major Thierry Prunnaud, said while watching the haggard Tutsi faces. 'This is not what we were led to believe. We were told that Tutsis were killing Hutus, we thought the Hutus were the good guys and the victims.'

It has truly been an eye-opening week for the hundreds of French soldiers involved in Operation Turquoise, France's stop-gap humanitarian mission to halt the wholesale slaughter of civilians in Rwanda until the United Nations was able to raise its own peace-keeping force for the job.

Rwanda's Hutu government is a traditional ally of Paris, so when soldiers first crossed into government-controlled western Rwanda 10 days ago and were greeted by crowds of Hutus waving French flags, many believed that it was the minority Tutsis, and the Tutsi-led rebel Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) who were responsible for the killings.

Reality came crushing down on them on Thursday when the French entered the Bisesro mountains just south

of Kibuye. Hutu government officials had told a French base nearby that RPF guerrillas had infiltrated the mountains and that the Tutsi civilians themselves were armed and carrying out nightly attacks on Hutu villages.

Braced for possible confrontation with an enemy force, the French were little prepared for what they would eventually find. Instead of rebel soldiers, the French discovered hundreds of Tutsi men, women and children, some so thin that it looked like the wind would snap them in two, hiding in the bushes and surviving on raw potatoes and roots, which they foraged for at night.

In all 990 Tutsis, including 400 children - most of them orphaned - were discovered by yesterday. Many were in need of urgent medical attention and food and water.

The Tutsis had fled systematic attacks to exterminate them, hoping that the mountains would offer them protection. Until the French arrived, protection was the last thing they found there. Almost every day for the last three months, Rwandan government troops and militias combed the forests of the Bisesro mountains looking for Tutsis to kill.

Organising a low-tech killing machine of people armed with clubs, machetes, knives and spears, the Hutus

set about their grim task with gusto and are thought to have killed hundreds, possibly thousands, of people around Bisesro.

The fields in the mountains are scattered with corpses. They are in streams and in cornfields, in the pine forests and among banana trees. Many of the bodies are of women and children. Many have been decapitated or had their skulls smashed in.

About 200 of the survivors bore wounds so horrific that even the French soldiers could not look at them without flinching. There were women and children with festering gashes from machetes aimed at their abdomens and heads. There were men with gangrenous wounds from grenades and spear attacks.

By yesterday the French had evacuated more than 100 people for emergency surgery and had established a base camp with 80 marine commandoes to protect the remnants of the 10,000-strong community from the Hutu militias still visible on a nearby hillside.

A radio station operated by extremist Hutus, RTL, has reportedly started to accuse the French of collab-

orating with the RPF. The French reject all criticism of partisanship, but as times goes on it may be more and more difficult for the French to maintain this position. The delicacy of the French position was recognised on Friday by the French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppe, who said he was worried that Rwanda could become a Somalia for the French forces.

The big test for the French looks likely to take place at Butare, Rwanda's second city and one of the government's main strongholds in the west. RPF rebels opened fire on the city late on Friday and yesterday were reportedly only five kilometres away from the centre and closing in fast. Hundreds of thousands of Hutus are reported to be fleeing the rebel advance.

The RPF has warned the French not to get in the way of their drive, but yesterday an unspecified number of French troops were on their way to the area to protect civilians.

GOMA, Zaire - Rwandan rebels advancing on Kigali have completely surrounded the city, a French military spokesman said yesterday, AFP reports.